



Sarah Meyers Brent

Natural Disasters

BY CHRISTINE TEMIN

Opposite and above: 2 views of *Beautiful Decay*, 2016. Acrylic, foam, and mixed media on cloth and wire, 208 x 120 x 36 in.

Sarah Meyers Brent's friends tend to donate their used clothes to her, as if she were a branch of Goodwill. Not that she needs these garments to wear; instead, she uses them to construct complex sculptures in which their colors (faded to bright) and textures (smooth or fuzzy) add essential qualities to finished forms that can cascade down a wall like a waterfall, pooling on the floor, or wrap around a pole.

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Above: *Beautiful Mess*, 2017. Fabric, acrylic, and mixed media on drywall, 144 x 120 x 75 in. Left: *Seep*, 2011. Acrylic and mixed media on cloth, wire, and wood, 60 x 102 x 30 in.



Brent works in a high-ceilinged studio in an old manufacturing building in the Boston suburb of Waltham, Massachusetts. She grew up in Hadley, New York, a small town south of Saratoga Springs. She recalls that, as a child, “I always did drawing. One of my grandmothers made art, and I did it with her. I assumed that all my friends were doing it, too, but then I noticed they weren’t. I drew, made things out of clay, and painted a lot of people.” These pursuits continued through high school, after which she went to Skidmore College, not only because it is known for its arts programs and is near her hometown, but also “because it was free,” she says, “since both my parents worked there. My father taught in the biology department and my mother worked in the University Without Walls, an adult degree program.”

At Skidmore, Brent focused on painting, sculpture, and graphic design. She took dance courses and discussed collaborating with a choreographer who is also a Skidmore grad. She’d already visited Mexico and Italy with her parents and furthered her taste for international travel with a semester at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. She went there “because I’m Jewish and have some family who live outside Jerusalem. I’m very connected to the history and the traditions. I took art classes at a

kibbutz.” Overall, though, “the art I was making in college doesn’t have much to do with my recent work,” she says. “Right now, I’m working with lots of materials. The more textures, the more I like a project.”

After Skidmore, she got a graphic design job with a Boston-area company, designing music CDs. Then she taught abroad for a year, in Costa Rica, with a Harvard-affiliated program called WorldTeach. She set up English classes in an out-of-the-way village: “It was hard to make my own work there, but I did bring my sketch book. I drew a lot of landscapes while just hanging out on somebody’s porch. People there thought I was crazy. It was such a remote place.”

A graphic design job at Boston University Medical Center followed. But Brent “wanted to get away from being around a computer all day long” and do something with her hands, so she spent a year in Brandeis University’s post-baccalaureate certificate program, where she made “large paintings, so thick they were almost like reliefs.” She was “looking at Frank Auerbach a lot,” so most of these paintings were of the human figure. Brent “also made little sculptures out of natural materials, sticks, and wet paper.” She went on to do an MFA in painting at the University of New Hampshire at Durham, where she felt like “an oddball” in the traditional figurative program: “I just had a lot of materials I wanted to collage. The professors hated it.” When she started teaching, as an adjunct at various Boston-area institutions, she was determined to let her students have “a lot more freedom than I had.”

Brent’s works have telling titles such as *Seep* and *Ooze* and *Spewing Plant*, which convey their deliberate messiness. Like Robert Rauschenberg’s equally messy “Combiner,” Brent’s works blur the distinction between painting and sculpture. *Seep* drips its way down a corner of a room, ending with a splash on the floor. Its various materials add up to an amorphous, hard-to-categorize shape — not a rectangle, a circle, or anything else with a tidy name. Created during a residency at the Vermont Studio Center, *Seep* took advantage of the available empty space. Brent explains, “I’d never had a clean corner in my studio.” The work lurks in its niche: “I wanted to make something seeping but also something like a

TOP: HOWCROFT PHOTOGRAPHY / BOTTOM: HYEON PARK



Above: *Ooze III*, 2016. Foam, acrylic, cloth, and mixed media on board, 36 x 36 in. Top right: *Mommy Loves Me III*, 2017. Fabric, acrylic, foam, and mixed media on canvas, 77.5 x 50 in. Right: *Ode to Pregnancy*, 2014. Cloth, acrylic, and mixed media on panel, 39 x 76 in.

body. It’s about falling apart, a natural disaster about to happen. The form itself is creepy, I thought, as I was holding it and sewing it. But I also like that it looks really beautiful when it’s installed. It’s mostly wire mesh with fabric on top of it. The pieces hanging down are wire with natural plant materials, including leaves. It has a somewhat threatening presence, as if it might seep into the viewer’s consciousness. You want to clean up after it.”

In constructing a piece, Brent starts with an overall shape and “a specific place in a room or gallery.” A tall, pole-based sculpture was designed around a support beam in her old studio space. The armature begins with wire mesh and PVC pipes; then she collects “stuff,” ranging from dead flowers to dirt, foam, and gloves. The flowers, brittle and disintegrating, recall examples from Anselm Kiefer’s works. Brent gets her flowers from leftover arrangements on her kitchen table. She holds on to them for two to three years, so she has “a number of forms to choose from.” While acknowledging a link to 17th-century Dutch vanitas paintings, she’s “not a fan of their polished execution. I prefer paintings by Chaim Soutine or Francis Bacon.”

TOP, LEFT AND RIGHT: HOWCROFT PHOTOGRAPHY / BOTTOM: CAMILO RAMIREZ

Brent cites Lynda Benglis, Joan Snyder, and Joan Mitchell as important influences whose work she admires. “I feel an affinity with women artists,” she says, “although I don’t think of myself as a feminist artist.” But, “I do explore themes of motherhood.” While expecting her first child, she had difficulty moving, so she went back to drawing, making a group of charcoal works called the “Root” series, based on that underground form of plant nourishment. A second, high-risk pregnancy led to *Ode to Pregnancy*, a work in which sprayed-on foam clings perilously to a wall-mounted panel—life hanging in the balance.

By now Brent has had half a dozen solo shows, including two at the Kingston Gallery, a Boston co-op where she is a member. She’s been included in dozens of group shows, and won several awards and grants. Among her more vocal critics are her two small sons. She recalls the day that one of them looked at a collage titled *Mommy Loves Me III* and said, “That’s my shirt. I want it back.”

Christine Temin is a writer based in Boston.

